



Bridging the Culture Gap

Recently I was in Friedrichshafen, Germany for the Eurobike show. Eurobike is of course the European version of the Interbike show that happens in the United States every Fall. These two trade shows display products from innovators and brands in the relatively small global market of cycling. Less than 30% of the brands go to both shows. Visiting the two shows on an annual basis has given me a much more rounded view of the world-wide cycling market. Spending as much time as I have in Europe over the years, I understood the differences between their racing and our racing. It was also not hard to see that the bicycle was more deeply ingrained in their culture. Going to Eurobike and Interbike each year has shown me much more important differences. It's like getting the 30,000 foot elevation view and the microscope view at the same time.

I will come right out and say it: Eurobike blows Interbike away. The reasons are myriad. Too long to list here. I may be a dual-citizen, but I am not a pro-Europe USA basher. There is no way that someone can go to Eurobike and not feel that the cycling movement is more naturally supported than in the United States. While at Eurobike, I bring my Co-Motion Nor'Wester bike with S&S couplers. I fly into Munich, take the train to a nearby village, and set up my bike. From there, I ride about 15 miles to and from the show location. The route will be on dedicated, marked bike paths. There are rolling hills and gravel trails and I will arrive at the show feeling exhilarated. I'm excited to participate in the event. I feel integrated with the sport of cycling. Eurobike takes place in a number of wooden hangars that were at one time used to house zeppelins. In between the hangars, the outdoor space is used for cycling demonstrations like dirt jumping and new technologies. The table fare all around the show is excellent. Flavors and smells abound. After the show, I ride back to my bed and breakfast in the waning afternoon light. Sometimes I will stop at one of the many outdoor cafes on the route. Eventually I put the bike back in the room and relax with a beverage in the vibrant town square.

Interbike is something else altogether. I arrive into the blazing cauldron of Las Vegas. I stand in a 400 person long line for a taxi at the airport. I am transported to my casino-slash-hotel where I will momentarily conquer the nauseating maze of Las Vegas and find my room in a never-ending appendage of hallway. Even though I have only traveled four miles from the airport, the weight of the effort is oppressive. I usually opt to stay in, have room service, and wait for the show to begin. The show itself, inside the Sands Convention Center, only requires you to leave it's fluorescent refrigerator when you are coming or going. In some cases you never have to go outside at all. Las Vegas swallows you and you can spend the duration of your stay moving through it's bowels. If you try to ride a bicycle in Las Vegas, as I did one year on my Co-Motion, you risk your life in front of run-down cabs piloted by newly transplanted drivers from third-world countries. It's a risk that is simply not worth it.

At Eurobike, executives from companies that also travel to Interbike openly state that their time in Las Vegas is agonizing for them. Americans at Eurobike on the other hand find a remarkably refreshing experience. This is not a comparison between the cities of Friedrichshafen, Germany and Las Vegas, Nevada. However, the fact that Interbike still takes place in Las Vegas after all these years makes a statement about cycling in the United States: We have an inability to unite and command the direction of the bicycle in this country.

That it's taken acutely rising oil prices for the bicycle to become noticed as a transportation option in America is not surprising. My hope is that throngs of people will rediscover their old 27" steel rimmed Schwinn or the mountain bike that they bought in the early 90's and take a few trips to the office, grocery store or pub. They will find that the bicycle truly is an alternative to the car. It can literally be a life-changing realization. We all know the upside of cycling. Our country for the most part does not. This type of urban cycling is seeing a plethora of products being introduced that make it safer, more comfortable, and even cool. There are new bikes, lights, bags, shoes, helmets and clothing designed expressly for people who are committing themselves to using the bicycle for more than training, racing and touring.

What does this have to do with bike racing you ask? Whether you know it or not, you are an ambassador for cycling. You can make a difference. Ordinary people do not think that they can effectively use the bicycle in their everyday lives. You can help them believe that they can. When you help someone get back on a bike, no matter what age they are, you're doing more than opening a path to greater health and excitement in their lives. You're helping local bike shops and the cycling industry as a whole. Bicycle racing ultimately becomes a beneficiary when a culture adopts the bicycle as more than a tool for the young and the restless.

As a professional road rider, I kept an apartment in Kortrijk, Belgium. From it's window, there was an unobstructed view of the street below. On days when the rain blasted the window so loudly I couldn't hear the TV, I would go to it and look out. Never more than a minute would pass before someone would come by on a bicycle. It would usually be an elderly woman on a black upright bike with fenders and baskets, carrying bags of groceries or other supplies. The rider would have their head down, shoulder buried into the crosswind and rain. Sometimes it was enough to inspire me to get outside and get my own ride done.

It may be a long time before that becomes a frequent scene in the United States. In 2008 though we have seen changes in this country that have planted the seed. Racing cyclists tend to consider the lightweight road racing bike to be the only option for two-wheeled propulsion. It took some years to put together a bike with the versatility to take me places I never considered riding a bike to. Save yourself that time. This Fall, discover the difference that a few alterations to your bike can make in the way that you use it. Get a good, strong headlight and a tail light that blinks bright red. Lever on a set of wider tires with some decent tread. Modern trekking tires can take you to the ends of the Earth on nearly any surface and makes punctures a thing of the past. Fix a pair of fenders over those. If your frame has eyelets, get a sturdy rear rack. Lastly, get a set of waterproof panniers to put on it. If you don't have eyelets, there are luggage systems available now that fix to the frame via tags that don't add much weight or bulk.

Transforming your bike this way will change the way you look at cycling. You will start to look forward to riding at odd times of the day and night and in any weather. Simple trips to the grocery store or a concert will become exciting. You'll see the commute as the best part of every trip you make. Pretty soon you'll realize you haven't driven your car in four days.

Then two weeks. When Spring arrives, the long miles on the bike in preparation for racing season will come easier, too. You'll find yourself looking at new lights at the local shop as much as the new light wheels. When you get to that point, you'll really be able to point all of your non-racing friends in the right direction toward their own cycling freedom. Transportation is evolving. Be a part of the movement.

Paul Willerton, a citizen of both the USA and Switzerland, thought he might never return to Europe again after he rode his last race there. How quickly he proved himself wrong. He now enjoys the place more than ever before.